

# SELLING TO SCHOOLS 101

Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) Farm to School Program aims to provide assistance and support links between local produce growers and Washington school districts. In this fact sheet, you will find the basics about the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP), tips to sell your products to school food service, and information about your role in educating our future generation about the importance of agriculture and healthy living.

## WHAT IS THE USDA NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM?

The NSLP is a federal program, which helps provide nutritious and balanced lunches to over 100,000 public and not-for-profit private schools and certain childcare institutions, reaching more than 30 million students each school year<sup>1</sup>. Students in participating schools buy a meal at full price, reduced price or for free, based on their family income. Local school food authorities or school districts determine their own full price (price for paid meal). Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those from families with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals (cost each student no more than 40 cents). Schools must serve free and reduced-price meals only to eligible children,<sup>i</sup> except for the students in the Community Eligibility Provision schools, where all students are served breakfast and lunch free of charge. Children from families with income over 185 percent of poverty pay a full price<sup>2</sup>. Local school food authorities or school districts determine their own full price (price for paid meal).

USDA subsidizes the costs for school lunches.<sup>ii</sup> USDA provides each participating school with cash reimbursements and some free food items through the USDA Foods program. The USDA Foods program provides credits to schools each school year and schools choose to purchase a wide variety of nutritious foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, meat/meat alternates, and dairy products with the credits. Current reimbursement rates are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Reimbursement rates for schools serving free and reduced-price lunches:

National School Lunch Program (Contiguous States) <sup>2</sup> July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019				
% Free or Reduced-price Eligible	<60%	>60%	New Meal Pattern Compliance	USDA Foods
<b>Paid</b>	\$0.31	\$0.37		
<b>Reduced Price</b>	\$2.91	\$2.93	+ \$0.06 per lunch served	\$0.3350 per lunch served
<b>Free</b>	\$3.231	\$3.37		

\*Produce budget is usually around \$0.20 – 0.30 per lunch serving (approximately 8-12% of the total cost of lunch). Reimbursement rates are updated every school year and available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/rates-reimbursement>.

## WHAT ARE THE NEW NUTRITION STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL LUNCHES?

Starting in 2012-2013 school year, a set of new regulations must be followed by schools participating in NSLP. Some highlights of the new rules that differ from the previous standards include:

- Increases the amount and variety of fruits and vegetables served in school lunches, with requirements for serving specific servings of vegetables per week from the vegetable subgroups (dark green, red/orange, legume, starchy and other.)
- Requires children to take at least ½ cup of fruits or vegetables at lunch.
- Requires food-based menu planning (e.g. 1 cup of vegetables) instead of nutrient-based menu planning (e.g. 60 grams of protein).
- Requires all grains served to be whole grain rich, meaning 50% or more of the grain ingredients are whole grain.
- Limits the use of fruit juice as a fruit alternative.
- Establishes new age categories for menu planning.<sup>iii</sup>

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services. Figure as of October 2014. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>

<sup>2</sup> For the period July 1, 2013 to June 30, 2014, 130 percent of the poverty level is \$30,615 for a family of four; 185 percent is \$43,568.

Under the new rules, schools need to offer varieties of produce to students, which is a great opportunity for local produce growers to sell their products to school districts. There are also opportunities for Washington producers to sell meats, beans and legumes, low-fat dairy and whole grain products to schools.

## FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS OF SCHOOL LUNCHES

School lunch programs have very tight budgets. Especially under the new regulations, it is challenging for school food services to cover the full cost of meals. The budget varies by districts; however, a produce budget is usually around \$0.20 – 0.30 per lunch or student (approximately 8-12% of the total cost of lunch). Schools offer a ½ to 1 cup serving of fruits and a ¾ to 1 cup serving of vegetables per lunch or student (depending age group) with this budget.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN YOU SELL TO SCHOOLS?

- Determine which products you can reliably supply to schools, and prepare a list of products with item descriptions, product variety, pack size, count per unit, price per unit, etc. See a sample list in Table 2.

- Determine logistics such as transportation and payment methods. Think about the following questions:
  - Do you have a minimum amount, volume or dollar value for orders?
  - What method of payment do you accept? – Purchase order, credit card, Net 30/payment within 30 days etc.
  - Can you deliver? If so, do you have a maximum distance you are willing to travel? Can you deliver to multiple sites? How much freight do you need to charge if any?
  - Do you sell through a food hub, or allow pick-up directly from the farm or at your farmers market booth?
- Set up a meeting with the school purchasing staff to learn more about their needs. Bring samples and share information about your seasons, prices, pack sizes, and delivery details. For more information on schools' needs, see WSDA Farm to School Toolkit Farmer/Processor Resource page. [Resource 1 on p.4]
- Provide food safety information. One of the most important questions that school food service staff ask is how the produce has been handled. See [WSDA Farm to School Risk Management and Food Safety web page](#) [Resource 2 on p.4.] and review [WSDA's Bridging the GAPs Farm Guide](#) to learn more about on-farm food safety. [Resource 3 on p.4]

**Table 2.** Sample list of products by season

	Item	Variety	Pack Size	Count per Pack	Price per Pack
<b>Fall: Sep - Nov</b>	Apples	Braeburn, Fuji, Gala, Pink lady	20 lbs (volume fill)	45-55 ct	\$18.00
	Pears	Anjou, Bartlett, Bosc	22 lbs, Half carton	50-60 ct	\$22.00
	Cabbages	Green, purple, savoy	12 lbs	6-8 heads	\$13.50
	Carrots	Nantes (orange)	24 ct (bunched) 5 lbs (loose, bagged)	8-10 ea/bunch 50-70 ea/bag	\$22.50/pack \$4.00/bag
<b>Winter: Dec - Mar</b>	Broccoli	Green	10 lbs	6-7 crowns	\$15.00
	Kale	Lacinato	24 ct (bunched)	¾ lb/bunch	\$18.00
	Winter Squashes	Delicata	20 lbs bulk		\$12.00
<b>Spring: Apr - Jun</b>	Asparagus	Green	Bulk		\$2.00/lb
	Radishes	Easter	24 ct (bunched)	10-12 radishes	\$24.00
	Rhubarb	Crimson	20 lbs bulk		\$24.00
<b>Summer: Jul - Sep</b>	Corn	Bi-color	40 lbs	48 ct	\$15.00
	Pod peas	Sugar Snap	10 lbs		\$18.50
	Tomatoes	Cherry, Grape	flat	12 pints	\$22.00
	Zucchini	Green	20 lbs	36-40 ct	\$15.00

## PURCHASING MODELS WHEN SELLING TO SCHOOLS

Purchasing models at schools can range from quotes and bids to fresh sheets and online catalogs. The purchasing can also depend on the amount and price of the product order. For example, under a small purchase threshold, a school or district can use an informal bid process.

*Who do schools purchase from?*

- Contracted distributors (broad line and produce), direct from producers and processors

*What do schools purchase?*

- Locally grown – fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains, meat, dairy, prepared or packaged snacks or entrees

*When do schools purchase food?*

- Annual contracts (usually in summer), seasonal contracts, one-time purchases for special events (Taste WA Day in Sept/Oct, Farm to School Month in Oct, Harvest of the Month), or a forward contract asking a farm to grow items specifically for schools to be purchased later in the year (usually in Jan- Mar, before farms plant for the year).

*Where do schools find vendors?*

- Farmers markets, online, WSDA, direct outreach

*How do schools contact vendors?*

- Phone, email, in person

## THE PURCHASING PROCESS

There are three types of processes that schools use to purchase food: micro-purchase, informal and formal, depending on the amount of the purchase. In any method, school districts can use a geographic preference to provide an advantage to those providing food within the district's specified geographic preference area. This fact sheet provides a simplified description of the process. For more detailed information, please review ["A School's Guide to Purchasing Washington-Grown Food."](#) [Resource 4 on p.4].

*Formal:* Invitation for bid, request for proposal – must be used for purchases over the Small Purchase Threshold

(\$75,000 for most purchases; \$250,000 for purchases of Washington-grown food)

- Prepare solicitation, include evaluation criteria
- Advertise in newspaper & post at school board office
- Evaluate responses & award contract to lowest responsible bidder

*Informal:* request for quotes – may be used for purchases under the Small Purchase Threshold of \$250,000

- Request quotes (may use fresh sheets, farmers markets, email, phone, RFQ)
- Evaluate and document at least 3 quotes
- Select winning quote and purchase food

*Micro-purchase:* direct buy – may be used for purchases under \$10,000.

- Contact vendor with the products you wish to buy
- If price is considered reasonable, make the purchase
- Distribute micro-purchases evenly amongst qualified vendors

*Geographic Preference Option*

- School District defines local, but it can include the entire state of Washington
- Schools may only use a geographic preference for minimally-processed foods<sup>3</sup>, as defined by USDA.
- School District decides amount of preference (how much more they are willing to pay for locally grown items) and method of applying the preference (point system, percentage price preference, etc.)
- Schools cannot *require* food from their preference area, but can only provide an advantage.
- Schools can preference *product* based on geography, but not suppliers.

## WHAT ELSE MIGHT SCHOOLS ASK FOR?

- Specifications: variety, quality, size/count/amount/price, type of processing, # days from harvest to delivery, traceability, refrigeration, presence of preservatives/wax coatings/stickers. See

<sup>3</sup> USDA's definition of Minimal Processing under the Geographic Preference Option is as follows: Cooling; refrigerating; freezing; size adjustment made by peeling, slicing, dicing, cutting, chopping, shucking, and grinding; forming ground products into patties without any additives or fillers; drying/dehydration; washing; packaging (such as placing eggs in cartons),

vacuum packing and bagging (such as placing vegetables in bags or combining two or more types of vegetables or fruits in a single package); addition of ascorbic acid or other preservatives to prevent oxidation of produce; butchering livestock and poultry; cleaning of fish; and the pasteurization of milk.

WSDA Fact sheets for farmers and processors.  
[Resources 4-6 on p.4]

- Food Safety: GAP certification, food safety check list, FSMA. For more information, please visit our [Risk Management and Food Safety](#) and [Bridging the GAPs](#) web pages. [Resources 2 and 3 on p.4]
- Liability insurance
- WA-grown/source identified on invoice and at POS
- Delivery & payment options (multiple sites, how far, cost built in to purchase total) (Purchase orders, credit card, net 30, etc.)
- Labeling/Product documentation: Schools need to document how the foods they serve meet federal nutrition guidelines, so for products with multiple ingredients schools may ask you for an ingredient list and/or letter on your company letterhead (product formulation statement) so they can show how the food meets their meal pattern requirements.

## STAY CONNECTED TO YOUR COMMUNITY

As a local producer and participant of a farm to school program, you play an important role in the community. Here are some examples of how you can help students connect to the environment and local agriculture:

- Host a farm tour for school field trip.
- Offer a personal visit to school cafeterias to hold a fun tasting event in partnership with school food service to introduce:
  - Produce items that are new to school lunch
  - Seasonal specialties
  - Different varieties of the same fruits or vegetables
- Offer visits to classrooms and cafeterias. Tell farm stories and show pictures to students during school lunch and other events.
  - Teachers usually plan their curriculum for the following school year starting in spring. Preparing a one-pager of what you can offer or talk about, such as farm visit, composting, growing cycle, and the role of weather on crops, etc., will help teachers to think through tie-in opportunities.
- Participate in special events:
  - Taste Washington Day (annually, at the end of September or beginning of October; or any day/week that your local school district choose)

- National Farm to School Month (October)

## HELPFUL RESOURCES

1. WSDA ONLINE FARM TO SCHOOL TOOLKIT: Resources for Farmers/Processors:  
<http://www.wafarmtoschool.org/Page/89/Processor-Toolkit>
2. WSDA ONLINE FARM TO SCHOOL TOOLKIT: Risk Management and Food Safety information , including sample food safety questionnaires:  
[www.wafarmtoschool.org/Page/16/risk-management-and-food-safety](http://www.wafarmtoschool.org/Page/16/risk-management-and-food-safety)
3. WSDA WEBSITE: Bridging the GAPs resources regarding on-farm food safety and Good Agricultural Practices, including the Farm Guide:  
[agr.wa.gov/inspections/GAPGHP/](http://agr.wa.gov/inspections/GAPGHP/)
4. WSDA PUBLICATION: “A School’s Guide to Purchasing Washington-Grown Food” and updated templates for download at:  
[www.wafarmtoschool.org/Page/73/procurement](http://www.wafarmtoschool.org/Page/73/procurement)
5. WSDA FACT SHEET: Top 10 Minimally Processed Produce Items in Washington Schools:  
[www.wafarmtoschool.org/Content/Documents/F2STo p10MinimallyProcessed.pdf](http://www.wafarmtoschool.org/Content/Documents/F2STo p10MinimallyProcessed.pdf)
6. WSDA FACT SHEET: Produce Pack Size Chart for Top 10 Minimally Processed Produce Items:  
[www.wafarmtoschool.org/Content/Documents/F2SProducePackSizeChart.pdf](http://www.wafarmtoschool.org/Content/Documents/F2SProducePackSizeChart.pdf)
7. WSDA FACT SHEET: USDA School Meal Pattern Produce Basics:  
[www.wafarmtoschool.org/Content/Documents/F2SUSDASchoolMealPatternBasics.pdf](http://www.wafarmtoschool.org/Content/Documents/F2SUSDASchoolMealPatternBasics.pdf)

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Washington State Department of Agriculture Farm to School Online Toolkit: [www.wafarmtoschool.org/](http://www.wafarmtoschool.org/)
- USDA National School Lunch Program: [www.fns.usda.gov/slp](http://www.fns.usda.gov/slp)
- National Farm to School Month: [www.farmtoschoolmonth.org](http://www.farmtoschoolmonth.org)

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<sup>i</sup> Program fact sheet. National School Lunch Program. U.S. Department of Agriculture, August 2012.  
Reference:

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Child Nutrition Programs; Income Eligibility Guidelines, Federal Register, Vol. 78, No. 56, Friday, March 22, 2013. Notices 17629.

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<sup>iii</sup> Final Summary of Public Comments Received on USDA's NSLP/SBP Meal Pattern Requirements and Nutrition Standards NPRM, Docket FNS-2007-0038

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